

## CASE STUDY

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# Using School-Based Mentoring for Attendance and Post-Secondary Success

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For more information about implementing a mentoring program at school, see [this guide](#) in our series *Promising Practices from Washington State*.



### CASE STUDY SCHOOL

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The practice described in this guide is based on the experience of Lumen High School (Lumen). Lumen is located in Spokane, Washington and serves teen parents in 9th to 12th grade. The public charter school opened in September, 2020. In the 2023-24 school year, 32 students were enrolled; 88% of students were low-income, 16% were homeless, and 59% were unaccompanied minors. For a detailed school profile, see [appendix A](#).

In the fall of 2023, Lumen High School implemented a mentorship program to better support its student population of teen parents. The program launched with two initial goals: improve school attendance and support students in their semester-long internships.

Student attendance was an ongoing concern for Lumen leaders. Lumen students, in addition to being teen parents, face multiple, overlapping challenges. In the 2023–24 school year, 59% were unaccompanied minors, 16% were homeless, and 17% were involved in the juvenile justice system. Many students had to navigate employment, housing applications, and court systems, in addition to juggling school work and childcare. It's no surprise that demands like these would negatively impact attendance; no student met the district's reporting guidelines of fewer than two absences per month.<sup>1</sup> On average, the rate of student absences [equated to](#) 3.8 days per month during the 2022–23 school year.

Though Lumen students have unique needs, their experience with attendance was not unusual. Nationwide, chronic absenteeism skyrocketed during the COVID-19 pandemic and numbers have yet to wane. The share of U.S. students who were absent for at least 10% of the school year rose from 15% in 2019 to 28% in 2022. In low-income communities, chronic absenteeism rose from 19% to 32%.<sup>2</sup>

1 In Washington State, an absence is missing half a day or more of school, excused or unexcused.

2 Malkus, N. (2024). Long COVID for public schools: Chronic absenteeism before and after the pandemic. *American Enterprise Institute*. Retrieved from <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/long-covid-for-public-schools-chronic-absenteeism-before-and-after-the-pandemic/>

At the same time that Lumen sought new ways to improve attendance, it was also scaling up a program that put qualified students into paid internships once a week. The internship program is part of the school's efforts to place students on a path toward post-secondary success. Lumen leaders hope that internships will prepare students for life after high school by giving them work experience in jobs with living wage potential. The experience can also help students try different career options and clarify the kind of post-secondary training they will need.

As the internship program ramped up, the school worried that their single internship coordinator would become overwhelmed by the daunting task of maintaining communication with all the students and internship sites on a regular basis. The school also believed that they would be able to improve the internship program faster by gathering input from multiple school staff — input informed by students' experiences.

### MENTORING PROVIDES THREE LAYERS OF SUPPORT:

- 1. Goal-oriented:** Schools select one or two annual goals for Mentor Center, like attendance or college and career readiness, which help organize mentoring activities for all students. Mentors can also collaborate with students on their own personal goals, like getting homework turned in on time.
- 2. Relationship-building:** Known as developmental mentoring, this occurs throughout the mentoring process as mentors and mentees build a trusting relationship.
- 3. Responsive:** Mentors check in regularly with mentees using open-ended prompts. This way they can identify and address student challenges as they arise.

## Lumen Tries a New Set of Supports

To combat attendance challenges and support student internships, Lumen High School introduced Mentor Center in the 2023–24 school year. The program ensures that every enrolled student has an adult who meets with them on a regular basis. That mentor also becomes a person the student can reach out to concerning issues in or out of school that may affect their academic life. “They automatically have that person who they know, no matter what, they can go to,” said Lumen’s internship coordinator.



Lumen is alternatively structured for teen parent education, so orientation toward care is a requisite principle when the high school hires and onboards new staff. This eased the introduction of Mentor Center. To launch the initiative, all school staff — including teachers, the office manager, leadership, counselor, and the lunch coordinator — were assigned two to four mentees. Many of those assignments were based on pre-existing relationships between staff and students. To build and strengthen relationships, administrators set aside time during staff meetings for mentors to plan ways to connect with their mentees. This included making cards and planning check-in activities.

School leadership expected mentors to check in with their mentees at least once a week. To guide these conversations, the internship coordinator and principal often shared prompts and activities in a common [spreadsheet](#). On weeks with no guided prompt, mentors had [general check-ins](#) with students. Mentors also pushed in on an ad hoc basis when the school's behavior support app, [Supported School](#), flagged that mentees were experiencing disciplinary issues or were struggling academically. (Supported School is a free software available to Washington State schools and helps track student progress.)

The mentoring practice guarantees that every student at Lumen receives support, not just students who are proactive about asking for help or who are in clear need of guidance. "It's supposed to ensure that every single student is developing a relationship with somebody," said the school's counselor.

Staff also found that Mentor Center helped streamline communication.

"If there is something going on at school, like a reminder that we need to give students, we can divide that labor that way, so it's like, 'Hey, just make sure you tell your three mentees that we're going shopping tomorrow and they need to wear warm clothes,'" said one staff member.

While Lumen staff always supported students, having designated mentees helped them clearly define who is responsible when a particular student needs help. The practice also helps build a more robust community between students and staff at Lumen. "It allows me to build a relationship with somebody that I would not normally have a relationship with," said the internship coordinator. "I think it is always helpful to know more students because it allows me to have conversations with them about what they want to do in their future."

## Lessons Learned

One significant lesson learned through the pilot effort was the importance of consistency. In the first year, to build new relationships, Mentor Center assigned new mentees at the beginning of the second semester. However, staff felt it would have been more beneficial to retain their original mentees and continue building on the trust they had already established. In interviews, staff also noted the importance of having prompts they can ask students, clear expectations, and time set aside for mentoring activities.





Mixed results are to be expected during a pilot year, especially when so many factors – inside school and out – can impact the success of a new initiative. Lumen examined data and student and staff perceptions to better understand the success and potential of the Mentor Center program. These learnings are described below.

## Stronger Relationships

As a school, Lumen already prioritized relationships before launching Mentor Center. However, Mentor Center may have helped solidify and reinforce this culture. Student perception of the student-teacher relationship improved from 66% in 2022–23 (prior to Mentor Center) to 81% in 2023–24 (during the pilot year of Mentor Center).<sup>3</sup>

There are many reasons why student perceptions change year-to-year, and we cannot know to what extent mentoring played a role in this increase. Nevertheless, student survey data aligned with what students said about mentoring in focus groups. Said one student about her mentor: “If I am having a bad day, I can just go talk to Sandra and Sandra will understand, Sandra will be there... She encourages me to be the best version of myself... [she] encourages me to go to class, be in class, and to be involved.”

Staff also experienced the impact a mentoring relationship can have. One mentor said she kept in touch with one of her mentees after the student dropped out of school. After several months, the student re-enrolled in Lumen. When the student returned, she often visited her mentor. “She [the mentee] said that I was a big reason why she wanted to come back... At the beginning of the year, she was showing up every day, during passing periods or whatever, just to say hi.”

## Mentoring goals: Attendance and internships

The school had no change in attendance before and after introducing Mentor Center. Attendance rates for the 2022–23 school year (before Mentor Center) and the 2023–24 school year (during the Mentor Center pilot) were the same – whether that was for all students enrolled at Lumen (51%) or just the students who enrolled at Lumen both years (54%).<sup>4</sup> However, staff engagement with the program was inconsistent in the second semester of the 2023–24 school year. School leadership hopes that by tightening expectations, they will see improvement in attendance rates in the future.



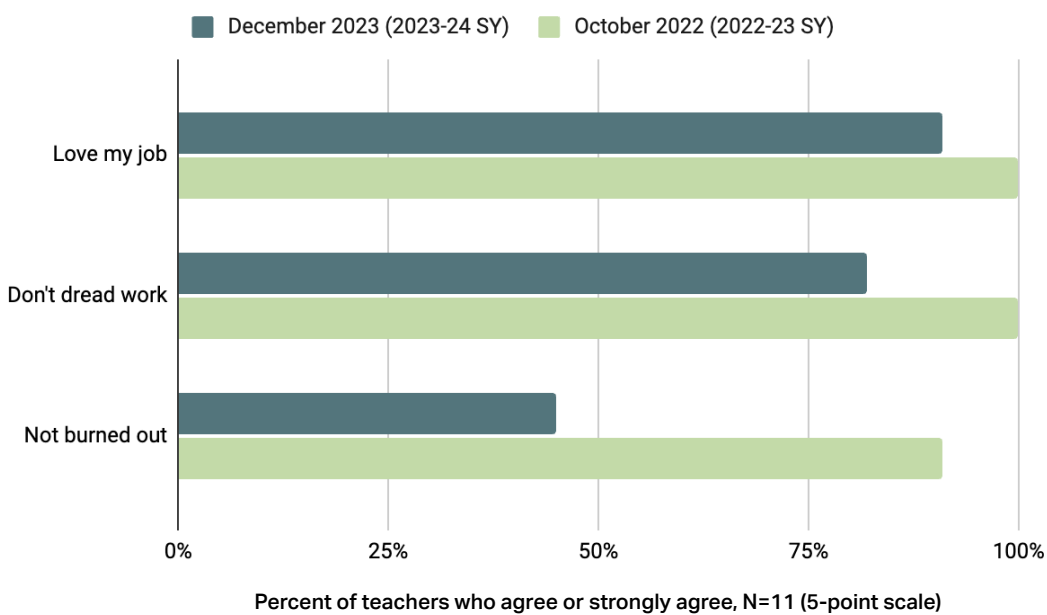
- <sup>3</sup> The school administered the [Kelvin](#) survey in November to December of 2022 and again in late fall of 2023. The school experiences high turnover and absence rates. However, the student demographics did not differ in any significant way over those two years (see appendix A), so we believe a comparison is possible.
- <sup>4</sup> Our analysis used attendance records shared by school staff. 60 students were included in the analysis of all students enrolled at Lumen; 19 students were enrolled both school years.

Mentoring did seem to support students in their internships. Lumen had four interns in the 2022–23 school year and 16 interns in 2023–24. Because of the school’s small size, that number accounted for half of all enrolled students. Mentoring served as an early warning system for this large proportion of Lumen students. The internship coordinator described the effect: “[Mentoring] created a good extra resource... I’ve gotten some updates from the staff. And they can say, hey, this [issue] is kinda happening.” The coordinator then followed up with the student and business partner, helping to address issues early.

## Teacher well-being

Strong student-teacher relationships can reduce burn-out, which contributes to a teacher’s overall sense of wellbeing.<sup>5</sup> Generally, Lumen teachers felt more satisfied in 2023-24 as compared to the previous school year. Mentoring may have contributed to that increase, although it was only one of a number of changes the school made that year.

**FIGURE 1:** *Teacher burn-out declined between the 2022–23 and 2023–24 school years*



Though Mentor Center is only one year into practice, Lumen staff feel that it is already rooted in the school’s culture. “I do think that it’s meaningful to call out, like, ‘Hey, this student belongs to this person,’” one teacher reported. ““Check in with him more than you might other students. Check that he’s not falling through the cracks.”” The school plans to continue Mentor Center, making changes in response to the lesson learned from the pilot effort.

5 Lumen administered the [Collaborative Problem Solving \(CPS\)](#) survey in October 2022 and December 2023. All but one student-facing staff (N = 11) took the survey both years. We used the teacher burnout subscale, below, to track teacher well-being.

## APPENDIX A:

# Profile of Lumen High School

**Location:** Spokane, Washington

**Founded:** 2020

**Level:** High school with onsite daycare/preschool

**Type:** School for teen parents

### ENROLLMENT

	2022–23 SY	2023–24 SY
Number enrolled	36	32
Students with disabilities	28%	12.5%
Multilingual learners	0%	3%
Unaccompanied minors*	50%	59%
Foster youth*	8%	2.3%
Juvenile justice involved*	No data	17%
Low-income students	92%	88%
Homeless students	36%	16%

**Source:** Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction [school report card](#); \*school social worker for data on unaccompanied minors, foster youth, and juvenile justice involved youth

### STUDENT RACE/ETHNICITY

	2022–23 SY	2023–24 SY
American Indian or Alaska Native	6%	13%
Asian	0%	3%
Black or African American	6%	3%
Hispanic or Latino	14%	19%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0%	6%
Two or more races	22%	19%
White	53%	37%

**Source:** Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction [school report card](#)

### ACADEMIC PROFILE

	2022–23 SY	2023–24 SY
Attendance	50.85%	51.01%
GPA for all students*	1.49	1.17
GPA for regular attenders†	2.89	2.53

**Source:** School attendance files and transcripts

**Notes:** \*Average student GPA was 1.48 prior to attending Lumen. Grading policies changed in the 2023-24 school year.

†Regular attenders are defined as students who attend at least 65% of the time.

### STAFFING PROFILE

**Administrators:** 2

**Teachers:** 4

**Push-in and small group academic support staff:** 2

**Social Worker:** 1

**School Counselor:** 1

**Internship Coordinator:** 1

**On-site community organizations:** 5

# About the Project

## Project Description

This guide is part of a two-year participatory evaluation that concluded in May 2024. We worked with Washington State public charter schools Lumen High School and Catalyst Public School. The evaluation started with a single question: “What is working in your school?” Researchers Georgia Heyward and Sivan Tuchman worked closely with school leaders to identify promising practices and create research plans to study implementation and outcomes. The result is [six guides](#) for each of the practices identified:

- Collaborative Conversations: A Skill-Building Restorative Practice
- Co-Teaching for All: Using Two Educators in a Classroom to Individualize Learning
- Cultivating Connection: How to Design and Implement School-Based Mentoring
- Social Health: A New Model for Wrap-Around School Services
- Station Rotation: Grouping Students for Individualized Learning
- Summer Professional Development: Creating a Foundation of Teacher Relationships

We also produced a [summary report](#) identifying how schools and systems can create learning environments that promote whole-school well-being. See that report for a full description of the research methodology.

## Authors

Georgia Heyward is the founder of Fig Education Lab, a nonprofit that conducts collaborative research, evaluation, and program design. Georgia is a former teacher and administrator, with experience spanning 1st through 12th grade in dual language schools. Prior to founding Fig Education, she was a researcher at the Center on Reinventing Public Education and Edunomics Lab. She has a Master’s in Education Policy from the University of Washington. Isaac Parrish is a former journalist; he was a writer and editor for The Central Virginian and the Orange County Review.

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